Before the founding of Monthly Review, Paul Sweezy had been an instructor at Harvard and the author of germinal works on the American economy. But his teaching and writing were always accompanied by vigorous engagement with the political movements of the time: he helped organize the Harvard Teachers’ Union, taught economics at the leftist Samuel Adams School in Boston, and, in 1948, took a leading role in Henry Wallace's presidential run on the pro-New Deal and anti-Gold War Progressive Party ticket in his home state of New Hampshire. As he often did, Sweezy combined his support of the Wallace third party challenge with his ongoing advocacy of socialism.

This, along with a lecture on Marxism he gave at the University of New Hampshire, attracted the attention of New Hampshire Attorney General Louis C. Wyman, then charged by the state legislature with an investigation of "subversive activities." In January 1954, Sweezy was subpoenaed. Wyman was especially interested in whether Paul thought socialism was inevitable, whether he "advocate[d] Marxism," and whether in this "or any former lectures [he] espoused the theory of dialectical materialism."

Sweezy's subpoena, the demand that he reveal his personal political views, the investigation of his political activities, and, finally, the demand for the names of others with whom he was active were a part of the larger "anticommunist" purge against militant trade unionists, opponents of the Cold War, and the remnants of the New Deal coalition which burgeoned at the end of the Second World War. Thousands of careers were destroyed; institutions and movements of the left were marginalized. For radicals and dissenters, how they would resist became a burning question. After the Hollywood Ten were sent to prison for asserting their right to refuse to discuss their political
views with Congressional inquisitors (in 1947)--the so-called First Amendment defense--it was assumed that only the Fifth Amendment's privilege against self-incrimination provided reasonable safety from contempt citations, trumped-up perjury charges, and jail. Indeed, for trade unionists indicted for purportedly violating the new Taft-Hartley law's anti-Communist provisions and those caught in the spy hysteria following Mao's victory in China and the Korean War, there was little option but to use the "Fifth."

In 1953, Albert Einstein (also part of the extended MR family--his "Why Socialism?" appeared in the first issue) proposed a renewed First Amendment attack on the very legitimacy of the purge; at the time, it must have seemed quixotic at best. Yet that is what editors and writers for Monthly Review, among others, did. In July 1953, founding editor Leo Huberman and frequent contributor Harvey O'Conner were called before Senator McCarthy. Both challenged the authority of his Committee, citing the First Amendment's freedom of expression guarantees. Huberman, directly confronting McCarthy, when asked how his views "deviated" from those of Communists, said, "I want to make it crystal clear that communism is not the issue [dots] the issue [is] my right as an author and editor to pursue my occupation."

Pursue it MR's editors did. In a special issue that year on "The Roots and Prospects of McCarthyism" contributors were mainly, and correctly, pessimistic about halting what seemed to be the flood-tide of witch-hunting; some even worried about the advent of an American variety of Fascism.

Paul's defiance of the local New Hampshire inquisitors was more than an act of personal principle. He refused to be drawn into questions of how people chose to defend themselves. While not asserting the privilege against self-incrimination, he defended that position as a necessary choice; he supported all who resisted the invasion of political liberties no matter how they did it. For Sweezy and Huberman, freedom of expression was not some abstract construction, but a necessary tool for their analysis of the worldwide struggle against imperialism, exploitation, and the other ills of capitalism, and for their advocacy of social justice.

Sweezy was convicted of contempt and his case wound its way through state and federal courts. In June 1957, the Supreme Court reversed Paul's conviction in a decision widely seen as part of the end of the witch-hunt. But MR's editors offered a different view. In 1954, they noted the beginning of the decline of McCarthyism. What had happened? With characteristic clarity, they noted that American big business and its allies had achieved its objectives: the large industrial unions had been domesticated and there was a consensus in support of Gold War objectives in international policy. The extreme right had served its purpose and could now be reined in. The Gold Warriors, both liberal and conservative, would return to business as usual.

We still live with the consequences of those times.

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